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High Technology Can End Pollution

THE NEW Commission on Population Growth and the American Future, to be headed by John D. Rockefeller III, must navigate in a shoal of ideological commitments. The most treacherous of these convey a sense of predestination that confounds practical answers to the real problems of the nation.

On one side, religious vitalists insist on the inviolable rights of every embryo, welcome or not, to a place in the womb and on earth. On the other, some evolutionary dogmatists, in a kind of ultramechanistic philosophy, preach our doom from the territorial imperative—though this should have made urban communities a logical impossibility from the start.

The ironical slogan of the new ecology is, "We have met the enemy and he is us." Is this self-abasement justified and necessary?

IN POOR countries, the essential problem is that population growth consumes most or all of their economic growth, leaving too little surplus for the capital investment needed for industrial modernization. Is this a problem in "rich" countries like the United States? With a long-range economic growth rate of 4 per cent a year in the GNP, need we be alarmed at a population growth rate of 1.1?

In global terms, perhaps not, provided that the indices had some real meaning and, even more important, that we were wise enough to use our economic gains to meet our real needs and to anticipate those of a new generation. The condition of our cities and the relic of poverty tell us otherwise.

The GNP, as economists have always pointed out, is itself a technical artifact that tells very little of the real standard of living. By the conventional accounting, it costs, and is somehow therefore worth, 10 times as much to maintain a garden in Chicago as in Cuernavaca. And if we hire 100 policemen or soldiers instead of 10, we must, I suppose, be producing 10 times as much.

The ecologists have begun to persuade America that much of the economic growth we had regarded as net income is actually the exploitation of a capital resource, the common environment. The radicals imply

that growth is nothing but exploitation; that industrial capitalism would be inviable if it had to nourish itself on real growth instead of robbing the earth. They say that it will never voluntarily surrender its power and prerogative to pollute for profit.

Despite the untimely survival of the oil depletion tax allowance, these ancient charges can be answered by progress such as the income tax, the regulated stock exchange, powerful labor unions and anti trust laws. Environmental law and equity are within our reach, too.

MANY OF our fears are fed by the unjustified "optimism" the power industry and mass producers of low-technology products who see an endless multiplication of present patterns of consumption. In fact, the cost of power has begun to rise for the first time in decades. This, together with more sophisticated lines of products, promises to temper our total energy needs: a computer consumes far less power than a steam shovel and an electronic or micro-filmed newspaper could help us spare the forests. High technology can also find an exciting (and profitable) challenge in the analysis and remedy of pollution itself.

To reach and tame that high technology requires heavy, continued investment of capital in education as well as in hardware. Wasteful misallocations in other spheres are then all the more costly. For example, we must indeed defend ourselves, but every dollar spent in a futile war or in dubious strategic systems is a mortgage on the quality of our life and even our military security tomorrow.

The Rockefeller commission could do an important service by re-analyzing the growth or decline of our real national product, taking account of the depreciation of our environment and the cost of restoring it. We could then calculate the rate of population growth our economy can support on the same terms as we press such calculations on others.

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